

Tips for Families on Addressing the Anniversary

As we move closer to the anniversary, we wanted to acknowledge how this may be another challenging time for your family, as anniversaries can create renewed feelings of distress and increased worries about something similar happening again. We can also anticipate increased media attention.

What can I look for in my children?

Children may react to the anniversary in a variety of ways, depending upon their age, developmental level, and their previous experience with trauma and loss. Some children may become agitated, anxious, withdrawn, or even aggressive. School-age children can demonstrate very specific new fears and avoidant behavior related to what they now perceive as unsafe/risky situations. Adolescents may be more reactive to rumors and respond with more reckless, acting out behaviors. For some, it may evoke a range of personal feelings of loss. Children may also take this time to do something kind for others in the community, at school, or within their family.

Who might need additional support?

- Those children who were directly affected by this event, the anniversary carries very personal meaning
- Children who have a history of trauma, violence, or sudden loss may require acknowledgement of their own personal tragedies
- Children who tend to be anxious may be more reactive to information about the anniversary and have a harder time being reassured

How can you help?

- Anticipate reminders related to the anniversary and help your children recognize and learn to cope with them. A child may not be fully aware of what he or she is remembering and may react with increased distress without knowing how or why the anniversary is triggering those feelings. By understanding children's specific reminders, adults may be able to help them to react less strongly and cope more successfully.
- Let children acknowledge the anniversary in their own way. Some children may express considerable interest, while others may choose to ignore the anniversary altogether. Don't force children to participate in ceremonies or memorials, or overload them with information. Take your cue from your child. There is no one right reaction. However, parents should make themselves available to talk to children about their thoughts, fears and feelings if and when they are ready.
- Be honest with children. It's OK to share your own reactions and concerns. Kids learn by watching their parents. When grown-ups are holding back, they can usually tell. Some children will ask, "Could it happen again?" It's best to answer such questions as honestly as possible. One approach is to tell children that lots of people are working very hard to make the school and our community safe. Point out the new procedures (e.g., sign-in procedures for visitors) to help them understand the efforts that are going on.
- Share any concerns you may have about your children during this period of time with the teachers or school personnel so that they can offer additional reassurance and be alert for signs of distress.
- Repeated exposure to media stories about the anniversary may heighten children's anxiety and distress. Try to limit your child's exposure to such stories.
- Provide children with opportunities to make a positive difference in their daily lives and in their community. Taking constructive action is an antidote to fear and helplessness. Families, schools, and communities can use the anniversary as an occasion to strengthen ties and renew shared values. Consider having children participate in acts of kindness. There is a great power in a community supporting and believing in the notion that each of us can make a difference and that it is our compassion and genuine caring for one another that connects us. Talk as a family as to what constructive acts you may want to commit to during this time and moving forward.
- Don't forget to take care of yourself! Make sure you take good physical care of yourself, including eating well, sleeping well, and receiving proper medical care. Take time to reach out to other parents and provide support to one another. Most importantly, give yourself extra breaks during this time.